not filed

UNITED NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1989/41/Add.2
31 May 1990

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Evaluation of United Nations technical co-operation project evaluation systems

Addendum

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Economic and Social Council the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Evaluation of United Nations technical co-operation project evaluation systems" (JIU/REP/88/6 (Parts I and II)).

Annex

COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON CO-ORDINATION

I. GENERAL

The report JIU/REP/88/6 entitled "Evaluation of the United Nations Technical Co-operation project evaluation systems" Parts I and II encompasses a wide variety of issues under the rubric of "project evaluation systems". The report is in two parts:- Part I, as defined by the author, "could be considered a diagnosis of the situation prevailing in the complex domain of the evaluation of U.N. technical co-operation project evaluation system" (Part II paragraph 1). The second part "proposes certain solutions as to the improvement of the procedures of evaluation and the reorganisation of its institutional structures (Part II para.1).

The report originally titled "Evaluation of projects in Asia and the Pacific" was reviewed extensively by the organizations principally addressed (UNDP, FAO, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNICEF and UNHCR). Much of the first draft was speculative in nature and sweeping in its conclusions. In their review of the final report the organisations 1/ recognise the efforts of the JIU to take into account the variety of critical comments made on the earlier draft. They welcome the fact that as a result of this effort the major recommendations of the Report have thereby been rendered more realistic. Organisations however noted that the title of the report had been enlarged to provide a global perspective without any apparent increase in the data used in its analysis. The ESCAP secretariat in their response pointed out that although ESCAP is particularly included in the review, no discussion is evident on the evaluation of regional projects and programmes.

Without exception all the responding secretariats welcome the essential purpose of the analysis which seeks to keep monitoring and evaluation practices, procedures and philosophies in the UN system under continuing review. The role of the JIU in strengthening evaluation work has been an important one and organisations wish to see it sustained.

In general however, the Secretary-General recognises that many of the responding organisations found the Report disappointing as to its method and its substance. The analysis by the JIU was felt to be innocent of the diversity and variety of the organisational management and evaluation systems reviewed. This persistent

---

1/ The 15 organisations responding to the Final Report are, at date, FAO, UNESCO, UNCHS, UNHCR, UNIDO, IAEA, UNDP, WFP, IMO, ILO, UNCTAD, ITU, ESCAP, WHO and ICAO.

tendency to treat all existing systems as one, "detracts from the value of the Report, even when it touches on potentially significant issues" (FAO response). The report, its analysis and conclusions, improved as they are, does not in the final analysis overcome the inconsistency in the messages and prescriptions emerging from it.

II. THE REPORT

The report and its contents can for the purpose of this analysis be grouped together under five topics.

A. Limitations of project oriented evaluation approaches; the importance of country specific evaluations and the holistic approach.

B. Strengthening monitoring practices at all levels of technical co-operation; the two "echelon" approach.

C. Enhancing effectiveness of currently operational monitoring and evaluation systems.

D. Strengthening governments' evaluation capability.

E. Enhancing the capacity of evaluation offices through increasing resources (human and financial) throughout various organisations.

Overall, the Secretary-General wishes to emphasize the fact that all these issues have been actively and systematically reviewed by the organisations and their evaluation managers, individually and collectively at inter-governmental and various inter-agency fora. The organizations also observe that the process of installing change in evaluation and monitoring practices requires longer time frames than for other procedure changes. Part of the reason lies in the genuinely decentralised environment that technical co-operation works in. Another part lies in the integral nature of formulation, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation practices - the change has to be at all levels.

The other part lies in a sensible desire not to overburden organisational practitioners with yet more directives and checklists than they currently have to deal with. The most important aspect is that the understanding of governments is critical to the real success of monitoring and evaluation. Given the extraordinary range of aid modalities governments have to deal with it is not surprising that they desire sufficient time to comprehend yet another variation in procedure.

Taking the issues individually:

A. Project Focussed Approach and Country Context Approach

The principal point of departure for this entire study is that project based evaluation is a prisoner of its own search, isolating itself from "socio-cultural contexts, the level of development already achieved and from the orientation of the economic refine" (Paragraph 22, Part I). It is then argued that an evaluation system so designed does not offer the advantages of a country level comprehensive impact evaluation which "portrays the situation in its true light before continuing, intensifying or abandoning the endeavour (Paragraph 64, Part I).

Evaluators (and indeed any person) concerned with development issues have always sought to attain effective correspondence between the abstractions of the project mode and the "truth" of the circumstances in which the anticipated development occurs. This search for a projectised representation of the variables and data that accurately reflect the essential elements and patterns that technical co-operation influences, is a continuing one. As technical co-operation enters newer and more complex areas of development this search becomes more difficult. The simpler earlier vision of technical co-operation as a one-way didactic process is being rapidly displaced with the recognition that notwithstanding continuing emphasis on technology transfer, mutual involvement of recipient and provider in defining both the problem and its solution is the basis for complex technical assistance. It therefore comes as a surprise that the JIU contrasts "project oriented evaluation with country oriented approaches". Not only are both types of evaluation necessary they (along with other approaches - sector reviews, country studies, etc.) are also complementary in function and purpose. Any system concerned with both the effectiveness and the management of aid will employ both and the others as well.

Evaluations are purposive, costly activities; and their process aspects are as important as the comprehensive attitude with which their tasks are approached. Also, the categories of evaluation are not confined to country oriented and project oriented ones. Thematic evaluations, ex-post evaluations and evaluations of a group of projects in a given country context (cross-cutting in nature) are some of the other instrumentalities available. UNDP has consistently urged that evaluation planning consider country level evaluation of project clusters so that a higher level aggregation of comprehensive information for decision makers is available. This urging is part of a general exhortation to see individual monitoring and evaluation responsibilities as mutually supportive elements in a systematic whole.

Amongst the stated shortcomings of project based evaluations is the misinterpretation that UNDP policy provides financial levels for selecting projects for evaluation. Routine application of such formal criteria to identify project evaluations to be undertaken

READEX FICHE

has been discouraged by UNDP and other organisations. A project is not evaluated automatically because it has a budget of over one million dollars. The availability of monitoring data, the nature of the project and country level issues also determine evaluability of UNDP projects. In fact many projects below the $1 million level are also evaluated. Every encouragement is given to approaching evaluation as a managed not a routine activity.

In responding, the various organisation have also pointed out that evaluations systematically address external factors outside the project frame; and furthermore they seek to understand why those factors were not paid more heed to at time of formulation or implementation. Rather than merely generate more "procedures" to ensure compliance with this comprehensive approach UN organisations are relying on programme and project advisory feedback communications which bring a variety of information on circumstances that influence project processes to the attention of project planners and implementers.

B. Strengthening and Improving of Monitoring

Under this title the report discusses an extraordinary range of issues. The management of projects by governments, shortcomings in application of fiscal procedures for government executed projects, inadequacy of back-stopping, the importance of audit controls and finally monitoring for likely impact and sustainability are all discussed and reviewed. A two-tiered monitoring system with increased centralisation as a consequence is also proposed. The first level of monitoring or echelon at the field or grass roots level is then subject to further review at a second level in the headquarters of the organisation concerned. The advantages claimed for second level monitoring are that these managers in headquarters have greater freedom to make assessments in regard to proposals then those at country levels. The presumed shortcomings of self-evaluation are linked to inadequacies in monitoring and discussed extensively. The conclusion is that project monitoring (on which evaluation to be effective must rely) is often itself not performed (due to a wide variety of competing priorities at the field level) or even not attempted (due to resource limitations).

The importance of sustained systematic monitoring and the need to continuously improve it is fully recognised by the organisations responding to this study. But as noted by IAEA, they also recognise the human and financial resources needed to implement the reports proposals. Cost apart there are several aspects to strengthening monitoring. As the varieties of technical co-operation increase, both in terms of the modalities and inputs employed, revised systems of monitoring need to be devised and implemented. Two recent thematic evaluations (Aquaculture - UNDP/FAO/Government of Norway; Rural Small Industrial Enterprises - UNDP/ILO/UNIDO /Government of Netherlands) both identified the need

to monitor impact of project results on beneficiaries. To devise and implement cost-effective monitoring systems without adding layers of control, inspection and confidentiality is a challenge that clearly needs to be and is being addressed. Monitoring is essentially a "first-echelon" function and it is most useful at that level. Monitoring the performance of field level information gathering and analysis is important. It should assist field personnel in performing their tasks better not necessarily lead to a formal second-level control function.

A second challenge to devising monitoring systems is that they should not impose multiple burdens on already busy national managers. Essential principles of monitoring need to be harmonized at a common level, whilst the demands of specific sectors/activities/organisational needs should be respected and suitable monitoring practices should be developed to respond to these specially identified needs. It would therefore be regressive to develop a supervisory monitoring system to be used by the UN system which excludes governments from the process. The monitoring systems of today must be the development information networks of tomorrow.

c. Enhancing Effectiveness of Currently Operational Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

Organisations using comprehensive evaluation systems endeavour to keep the various systemal elements continuously under review. They share good practices with their operational colleagues and highlight inadequate practices. The Secretary-General welcomes the various suggestions to strengthen existing practices provided by the JIU in the Report. In this instance UNIDO, FAO and UNESCO reiterate the desirability of strengthening the existing mechanisms of the self evaluation process by project management to be used in conjunction with the tripartite review as the primary approach to deal with implementation issues. UNDP, which has noted with interest the greater emphasis now being given to terminal evaluations, which address sustainability and impact issues, is considering using a technical review approach as a mid-course correction modality. Along with FAO it is reviewing the value of shifting the timing of evaluation towards a more terminal exercise so that project's likely impact and contribution to a variety of development efforts can be more easily scrutinised. The mid point indepth tripartite evaluation however should continue to be used where major implementation difficulties have arisen.

Finally, while the JIU's very broad finding that follow-up to tripartite review "is often very poor" (Paragraph 36 Part II) is noted, UNDP has expressed concern at this finding as its repeated scrutiny of this issue indicates that operational conclusions of tripartite reviews are effectively followed up, whilst policy level decisions take considerably longer to be implemented. It seems

that follow-up is not poor per se. It is that different decisions at different levels take more or less time to be implemented.

Overall the Secretary-General recognises that since the first JIU study of 1977 considerable improvement has taken place in monitoring and evaluation practices of the UN organisation. JIU/Report/85/11 on the Status of Internal Evaluations in the Organisation of the UN System fully recognised the advances made in the intervening period (1977-1985). It also recognised the increasing attention being given to integrating evaluation into decision making processes. Paragraph 9 of the Report under review (JIU/Report/88/6 Part I) also states that evaluation is now a normal and effective project management tool in UN organisations. The importance of enhancing the institutional role of evaluation and making it more responsive to the needs of governments is fully recognised.

D. Strengthening Governments' Evaluation Capabilities

The overall experience of the organisations concerned does not coincide with the JIU view in this Report that governments have little interest in evaluation (Paragraph 43, Part II). FAO reports that distinct progress can be discovered at the 2 levels urged by earlier JIU reports, viz government participation in evaluation of technical co-operation projects and secondly government at strengthening of their capability to evaluate development programmes. UNDP's data also supports this view. FAO, UNESCO, UNIDO and UNDP provide considerable direct training to government officials in monitoring and evaluation.

UNDP's experience to date suggests that it is not so much lack of interest that inhibits development in this field. It is the shortage of human resources, unequal strengths as between different sectoral evaluation capabilities, inadequacies of central planning and implementation methodologies and absence of institutional experience that are common obstacles to increasing systematic usage of evaluation as a tool, rather than simple disinterest that affects rapid development in this area.

E. Evaluation Services and Resource Availability

In 1985 JIU/Rep/85/11 identified that a key constraint limiting rigour and uniformity in dealing with evaluation was the resource and time limitations imposed by small evaluation units seeking to cope with significant and complex work programmes. In echoing the thoughtful emphasis of earlier JIU reports on this issue, the report clearly underlines in Part II, paragraphs 78-85, the disparity between "objectives and means". The Secretary-General whilst broadly supporting the necessary emphasis, also recognises the claims of competing priorities on resources for staff in the multilateral system as a whole.

F. Future Role of the JIU

Organisations that commented on this proposal of the JIU as to its likely future role (Paragraphs 116 and 117, Part II) endorsed the approach suggested, and welcomed the harmonised and systematic co-operation between UN Agencies and the JIU.

III. THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Report offers 4 recommendations. They were endorsed in their intent by the majority of the responding organisations. More specifically however:

Recommendation I

The recommendation suggesting the institutionalising of the Inter-Agency Working Group in Evaluation (IAWG) is welcomed. The organisations however stressed a flexible approach to strengthening collaboration which did not entail staff-intensive secretariats. FAO proposes that consideration be given to the chairmanship of the IAWG be on a rotational basis; and that the proposal to establish the secretariat unit at the UNDP central evaluation office be reviewed for its cost/effectiveness and in terms of a flexible institutional location. UNDP which is currently planning the Sixth IAWG (since 1983) welcomes comprehensive review of the issues and institutional arrangements which will promote quality evaluation work in the UN system. The Secretary-General takes due note of the various topics proposed by the JIU for study by the IAWG. He also recognises that some aspects of these different proposals have been or will be reviewed by the IAWG at their forthcoming meeting in October 1989.

Recommendation II

The first part of the recommendation urges that existing guidelines especially those prescribed in the UNDP manual be further streamlined and supplemented. FAO, UNESCO, UNIDO and UNDP endorse the need for continuing review of existing guidelines and implementing changes where necessary. However all organisations viewed with concern the counter-productive nature of a review that proliferates guidelines, checklists and manuals. It is also important to recognise that improvements in monitoring and evaluation must also be an integral part of an overall programme and project design and management reform. As regards the specific checklists and supplementary data suggested, tinkering with individual aspects lessens the overall effect of the development management cycle for the development of specific checklists. The organisations responding, found the more detailed proposals either too vaguely formulated or peripheral to practical aims of evaluation.

Recommendation III

The three aspects of this recommendation seek to improve monitoring practices. In general efforts to strengthen monitoring practices are always supported. However "Emphasizing" monitoring (or readjusting of priorities) at the expense of self-evaluation or any other form of evaluation was felt by the various organisations to be less than fully effective. It is important to see the monitoring/evaluation dimension as a continuum rather than being composed of only discrete and separate units. They are different yet overlapping in approach and content. Operational considerations will naturally emphasise differing activities, as between monitoring and evaluation thus distinguishing the two for practical rather than formal reasons.

The restructuring of the management of monitoring by introducing a second echelon is not specifically supported by any of the responding Agencies. UNESCO from whom the model is derived had the following comment "Regarding the restructuring of monitoring activities, it is clear that specialized agencies can benefit enormously from the experience of sister agencies, but it is less evident that systems and structures can be transplanted effectively due to the diversity of existing structures and objectives". FAO also indicated that "Although FAO concurs with the desirability of strengthening its monitoring functions both at the field and headquarters levels, the Director-General cannot support the specific means suggested. As indicated, the guiding principle in this respect should be that each agency evolve its own institutional arrangement most appropriately suited to its management requirements. In particular, the point raised in sub-section (c) of the Recommendation does not apply to FAO so far as monitoring of field projects in FAO already involves technical units, project operations units as well as country/regional programme offices". UNDP has also brought to the attention of the JIU the problems of over-centralising supervision in a rapidly decentralising development context. WHO, amongst many others stressed the importance of institutional arrangements for monitoring and evaluation reflecting unique and specific institutional structures and requirements of the various organisations.

The responding organisations all point out that the 3rd aspect of the recommendation involving deployment/transfer of staff to the field level to strengthen monitoring is not necessary as programme managers are already field located.

Recommendation IV

The three parts of this recommendation are all intended to strengthen the role of the central evaluation services and render responsibility and access direct to the highest level in their organisations. All organisations welcome the spirit of the

recommendation in seeking to give status and strength to evaluation activity. The Director-General of FAO "considers that the existing status of FAO's Evaluation Service is already in line with the suggestions in the first two parts of the recommendation, as confirmed by earlier JIU studies. Regarding the third part of the recommendation, however, the Director-General has reservations on two accounts: first, the role and relation of the central evaluation unit vis-a-vis the second-echelon monitoring should be determined within the context of the overall structure of the monitoring and evaluation system of each agency; and secondly, for the reasons given above, FAO cannot accept the references in this context to adoption of specific means such as the Inspectorate-General and Regional Offices nor the reference to the Recommendation III".

Attention is drawn to two matters raised specifically concerning FAO. In para. 56 of Part II of the Report, having observed that the inspection function, management monitoring and the auditing are performed by one unit within the Office of the Director-General, the report proposes that more autonomy be given to the auditing function, or even to separate it from the other two as practiced in Unesco. However, no evidence is given that FAO has favored the financial aspects of projects to the detriment of the other two aspects, and finds that there is no basis for the suggestion. It is also noted that the wide-ranging discussion of such functions as audit and inspection in the context of monitoring and evaluation of field programmes is somewhat confusing and inappropriate. In paragraph 71, also in Part II of the Report, it is indicated that the FAO Office of Internal Audit, Inspection and Management Control is responsible to the Deputy Director-General: this is not correct and that office is directly responsible to the Director-General.

UNESCO's response notes that the organisation was cited as having the optimal arrangement, with an independent Central Evaluation Unit reporting directly to the Director-General. However, since the JIU report was written, the name of the unit has been changed to the Central Programme Evaluation Unit and, along with the Bureau of the Budget and the Bureau of Programme Planning, it has been transferred to the Office for Planning, Budgeting and Evaluation which reports to the Director-General. Such a restructuring appeared to UNESCO to be indispensable in order to better co-ordinate the functions of the three services and to enable the Directorate to prepare decisions concerning the Organisation's general policy, to draw up the appropriate strategies, and to follow up and evaluate the programmes that are implemented.

ESCAP also mentioned (with regard to Part II Paragraphs 75-77 and 81) that "there is no organisational inconsistency because the Evaluation Unit has been established in the office of the Executive Secretary. It is only by coincidence that the co-ordinator is in his own right Chief of the Technical Co-operation Division".

Other organisations responding especially UNDP have dealt with this issue in considerable detail before and have no operational difficulty in accessing the highest levels of management in their organisation. The location of central evaluation units is less a question of independence and often more a question of best use of scarce resources. Independence, objectivity, utility and access to information and experience are some of the key variables that organisations have considered in locating central evaluation units.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore the Secretary-General agrees with the intent of the study in its wide ranging search to examine the various environments and conditions in which monitoring and evaluation operate. For evaluation as a whole the key set of questions address the issue of "what are the fundamental conditions of effectiveness". The answers will then illuminate the issues as to what works and does not work in the task of development co-operation. Notwithstanding some ambiguities in the analysis and a paucity of data the concerns expressed are important. Evaluation is neither a fetish nor a dogma; and its assumptions have to be periodically analysed and changes made.

It is however equally important to place evaluation and any changes in approaching it in context - within the changing nature of technical co-operation, the various organisational structures the varying needs of governments, and the different purposes it serves at different levels of usage and to recognise the financial and human resource allocations necessary for it to play a more extensive role. There is a particular need to recognise that any system in use within the UN system must constantly and persistantly evolve as governments develop their capacity to collect, analyse and use information about their own development. As such the concerns expressed in the JIU report may be very valuable in alerting managers about implementation of the current systems, not so much as guidance as to the path that lies ahead.